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U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell isn't rushing to defend Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano's handling of the attempted Christmas Day bombing of an airliner bound for Detroit. In a meeting with the Arizona Republic's editorial board, he said he wanted to see what comes from investigations into how national-security agencies worked before casting judgment on the former Arizona governor, a fellow Democrat.

The conversation also touched on the health-care-reform bill, immigration and upcoming elections. Excerpts:

Question: How do you view the recent events involving homeland security?

Answer: I was just as shocked and upset as anyone. I'm on a plane twice a week. I sent a letter to the chairmen of the Intelligence and Homeland Security committees saying we need to have hearings; what happened?

From the speech he gave Thursday, the president is saying the same thing. To use his words, we screwed up. They didn't connect the dots.

Q. What do you make of the criticism that's fallen on Napolitano?

A. Certainly, the system deserves a lot of criticism. The president has taken personal responsibility for it, so I don't know if it's all her responsibility or not. She's certainly part of it because most of those agencies are under her. I'm not so sure from what I've read that there won't be people whose jobs will be on the line when we get through with all the investigations.

Q. Should Napolitano be one of those people?

A. I don't know. We'll have to wait and see what happens, if the verdict is gross negligence on their part. I don't know who ultimately should be held responsible, except the president said he takes the blame.

Q. You've taken a lot of flak for your vote on the health-insurance-reform bill. Why did you vote for it?

A. To keep it moving. For over 50 years, there's been talk about reforming health care. This is the furthest it's ever been; it's passed both the House and the Senate.

When you look at the cost of health care, the fact that premiums are going up, co-pays are going up, deductibles are going up. In 2000, 50 percent of small businesses offered health insurance. It's down to 32 percent. It's the largest cost to counties, cities, school districts and individuals.

We can't continue to go on. I know the bill isn't perfect. I knew when I voted it wasn't the one that was going to be the final bill anyway. We needed to continue moving.

Q. What's been the reaction to that vote?

A. I was at a Starbucks close to my house. Two people came up to me to thank me for it. There's a lot of people, they come up and say, "Hey, I know someone who was denied coverage because of a pre-existing condition." That's a real concern.

I also had a guy come up to me in Costco and say he disagreed with my vote. I asked what he didn't like about it. "The mandates." Then he went on to say, "I wish I was living in 1796 when they first had the Bill of Rights. That's when we had freedom."

Q. What would be a perfect bill?

A. One that wouldn't raise debt. One in which people are not denied coverage because of pre-existing conditions. One in which everyone would be covered. Right now, those who have insurance are paying a hidden tax of \$1,100 a year to the uninsured.

And I'm not for throwing out the old system and starting a new one. This wasn't to do away with insurance companies. It was to try to make it competitive. The plan federal employees are on is like the exchange proposed in the bill. If you're in D.C., they have a choice of 120 different plans. That's an important part, not to do away with insurance but to offer plans that are competitive and give people choices.

Q. As the House and Senate bills are reconciled, is there anything that would be a deal breaker for you?

A. If they come back in and say the way we can save money to pay for the bill is to cut Medicare-reimbursement rates, that's a deal breaker. You're going to lose doctors. Hospitals are going to take a bigger hit. Other than that, I'll have to wait to see what comes out. I'm curious, like you, what's really going to happen.

Q. Looking ahead to the fall elections, your name keeps turning up on lists of vulnerable Democrats.

A. I've been in over 17 elections, and in every election, I've been in the minority. I was raised in this district, I got schooled in this district, I think I have a good feel for what this district is about. I come home every weekend to address concerns. I take this very, very seriously because I know the history of midterm elections. We're working very hard.

Q. As you think election, how do you feel about the prospect of facing immigration-reform legislation this year?

A. We've got to have this immigration issue addressed. It one of those things like health care that keeps getting pushed back and pushed back. Arizona has a peculiar interest in doing something about this because most of the illegal immigrants are coming through Arizona. We look at drop houses, home invasions, guns, drugs - much of this associated with illegal immigration.

We need to strengthen the borders. We need to make sure we know who's coming across and is in this country. At the same time, we also ought to take into account the needs of businesses. There's got to be a comprehensive bill.

Q. Where are you on guest workers?

A. There is a place for guest workers. I'm opposed to amnesty. That's craziness to say to anyone who's here, "OK, you're here." But I think there's a real need - I've talked to business people, not just agriculture people, but restaurants and the hospitality industry; they're all concerned about this.

Q. How are things going on the South Mountain Loop 202?

A. One of the real keys is getting the tribal government together with the state. It's a very delicate thing. If we could put the 202 on reservation land, there's a great savings that could occur because going through the mountain is very expensive. Most of it could be at grade, just as it is along Loop 101 on the Salt River reservation at Scottsdale.

It's in everybody's best interest to negotiate this and work out something where it's put on tribal land. It certainly benefits the Ahwatukee residents. It certainly benefits the tribe just as the 101 has done for the Salt River tribe. I don't think they want to miss that opportunity.